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ABSTRACT

This paper traces representational strategies employed by "Hoop Dreams," the documentary for which two black teenagers and their families consented to have three white film makers follow them around in their day-to-day life for five years. Storytelling techniques, choice of narrator, and on- vs. off-screen action all reflect film maker bias and filter reality. Of particular interest is the way the film employs juxtapositional editing strategies to make sociological observations about racial relations in current American society. As "Hoop Dreams" is placed against the broader cultural context of popular culture representations of class and race, and how mass audiences receive such works, the other topics of discussion which emerge include: (1) the current high visibility of black role models both positive and negative; (2) the images in "Hoop Dreams" contrasting sharply with the black affluence depicted in other television programming; (3) the ghetto playground as a fantasy melting pot experience for white America; and (4) the limitations of film and the documentary genre in depicting the whole person, his family relationships, and his sociological reality. Still, the paper concludes that the success of "Hoop Dreams" is a testament to good film making, as well as to the fact that American culture is desperate for messages that will bring races together rather then pushing them apart. (AEF/BEW)

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Representing The Ghetto Playground: From 'Be Like Mike' To *Hoop Dreams*

by Jeffrey Chown

Abstract

This paper traces representational strategies employed by the recent documentary *Hoop Dreams*. Of particular interest is the way the film employs juxtapositional editing strategies to make sociological observations about racial relations in current American society. The paper examines how this proceeds from traditional notions about what form and meaning the genre known as documentary film can exhibit. The phenomenon of *Hoop Dreams* is also placed against the broader cultural context of popular culture representations of class and race, and finally how mass audiences receive such works.

The problem with documentary as a form is that it invites loosely warranted claims of "truth," "objectivity," and "realism." It seems to have a different status than fictional films, which are more closely associated with "fantasy," "entertainment," and "contrivance." In the realm of the movie theater, the audience seems to prefer the latter descriptors to the former when deciding upon what to spend six or seven dollars. Documentary is normally confined to the province of the classroom, PBS, or the Discovery Channel. However, when a phenomenon comes along such as the film *Hoop Dreams*, which breaks box office records for the documentary form and fans a public outrage over its exclusion from the most contrived of Americana, the Academy Awards, then it is time to re-examine our coordinates.

The title alone should cause us to be wary; how does one visually document "dreams," a mental construct which can be explained orally, but becomes more difficult in a medium of the visual? The ultimate irony of this documentary is the confusion of whose dreams the film documents—Arthur Gates and William Agee's? Or are they merely stand-ins for the dreams of thousands of young, inner city basketball players? Or, and this will be the subject of this paper, are the dreams in question those of the audience who invests in the play of light and shadows that represents the film before them? Is it a white fantasy about the Other that *Hoop Dreams* serves up?[1]

Hoop Dreams emerges at a strange time in the history of American race relations. More black people than at any time since the Emancipation Proclamation are currently incarcerated. Affirmative Action is on the retreat and progressive social welfare programs to aid the poor are being systematically dismantled. The O. J. Simpson verdict has become a touchstone for a white backlash to black hostility towards the criminal justice system. And yet if we are an insensitive, racist culture, why is it that our televisions and movie screens have never been so open to positive black role models from the Cosbys to "Be Like Mike" to Colin Powell to Hollywood luminaries such as Danny Glover, Denzel Washington, Whoopi Goldberg, or Oprah Winfrey? At the same time, negative role models also abound. Rap artists using profanity and anti-social messages to denounce the racism of the white power structure are made millionaires by white teenagers flocking to buy the latest N.W.A. or Dr. Dre CD.

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These contrasts may be paradoxical and incongruous. Or we may need to consider whether even positive images of black people in the mainstream, dominant media in some way either contribute to or mask a systematic suppression of a race of people in America. To state the case in a more inflammatory way, are we moving to the socio-demographic point where if blacks can not follow the comfortable example of the Huxtables, America will write them off to crack houses and prisons? The concern in the following is with how documentary images of black America interface with these cultural developments.

On the surface, *Hoop Dreams* should be the antidote to white (and black) fantasy television such as "The Cosby Show" or "Fresh Prince of Bel Air," which depict a world of black affluence with little correspondence to demographic reality. In *Hoop Dreams*, one black family is depicted in the desperate background of the Cabrini Green housing projects and the other in the rowhouses of Chicago's west side. Electricity is turned off because the Agee family, living on welfare, can not come up with the bill. The father struggles with a crack addiction and turns to religion. The other boy's father deserted him at birth. His older brother is frequently unemployed and vicariously lives through his younger brother's successes. At the beginning of the film, the two fourteen-year-olds have fourth to fifth grade reading levels. *Hoop Dreams* seems to depict a level of desperation not normally encountered in American mainstream media's representation of black life, unless it is to set up a violent gangster rap story about drugs in the inner city.

But we should stand back for a moment. *Hoop Dreams* has an extraordinary propensity for escalating the level of abstraction about what its documentary images "mean." Two black teenagers and their families consented to have three white filmmakers follow them around in their day-to-day life for a period of five years. The images the filmmakers have collected and edited provoke David Denby to write: "Whatever else it is, the movie is a portrait of a wounded culture that, at the moment, can imagine very few ways to bind and heal itself."[2] How is it that video of two fourteen year olds who love basketball eventually becomes a "portrait of a wounded culture"?

The question is slightly facetious. Any documentary is only as interesting as it inspires our ability to move from the concrete to the abstract and to, as David Bordwell puts it, "make meaning."[3] Even a Discovery channel documentary about Rain Forest butterflies involves an inevitable level of abstraction or anthropomorphism as the viewer makes sense of the images before him or her. *Hoop Dreams* is only compelling if the documentary images of two black basketball players represent more than the two players involved, if we can make the next move and say these images mean something about our culture, our attitudes about race, our social organization. If the film does not invite this move, then we are simply using it to eavesdrop voyeuristically on two individuals exotic in their difference for us.

So I do not find Denby's assertion that *Hoop Dreams* portrays a "wounded culture" to be unreasonable; it just needs to be tested against other interpretations.[4] It would seem, however, that the most salient question about possible interpretations of *Hoop Dreams* is whether this film gives us positive and useful insight into racial questions, into questions concerning sport and society, or whether the film opportunistically capitalizes on current public fascination with black athletes. This same fascination makes a few fortunate individuals very wealthy, but it potentially reduces the range of career options conceivable for black males to sports and entertainment and not much else.

Sometime in the Eighties, basketball emerged as the preeminent media/marketing sport in American culture. With its fast, continuous action it is a more telegenic sport than baseball. With bare heads and legs, in effect visible bodies, it is a more human sport than football which features heavily padded

and protected players who are difficult to distinguish in a long shot. Basketball stars such as Michael Jordan or Magic Johnson have reaped the benefits of the growing public fascination with the game with outrageous commercial endorsement contracts, something on the order of $40 million per year for Jordan.

With the basketball fever which has made "slam dunk" part of the national vocabulary, has come an interest in the spawning ground for the mythic stars of the NBA who are predominantly black. This is of course the ghetto playground, which of late has become a primal fantasy land for white America. Pepsi, Mountain Dew, Nike, Reebok and a host of other corporations have begun developing ghetto playgrounds as prime repositories for seductive fantasies about their products. We see Shaquile O'Neal arguing with a cute ten-year old about drinking a pepsi at the neighborhood asphalt court. Or we see Charles Barkley and Michael Jordan chase Bugs Bunny around another urban court. (Note the spots with Jordan and Larry Bird are shot instead in an arena—Bird is associated with rural Indiana basketball and would seem incongruous in an urban setting.) Perhaps the biggest fantasy commercials are the ones where we see ethnically balanced teams playing, with white male models with GQ looks interspersed with black and latino players—as if the ghetto playground were a true melting pot experience.

Most amateur pick-up game players will tell you that playing outdoor basketball does have a way of leveling racial and class distinctions. Blacks and whites co-exist far more harmoniously on the basketball court than in other arenas of life. The rules of the playground game are easier to understand than the etiquette of societal interaction between the races, and weekend warriors can generally count an array of racial types as friends. However, the particular playground that Arthur Agee, William Gates, and countless black players before them compete on day in day out is for all intents and purposes a segregated, ghetto playground. It is a place that white players fantasize about being admitted to—a wild, dangerous place, where incredible ball is played—but they dare not enter this arena unless chaperoned. The film *White Men Can't Jump* plays with the transgressive notion of a white man entering this world; the fictional film's fantasy project is best revealed when Woody Harrelson, through the magic of camera angles, does seemingly dunk the ball on an inner city playground. However, *White Men Can't Jump* has more reality than the sanitized version of inner city life and athletic activities we see in television commercials. Pepsi would never have you believe that drive-by shootings can happen, drugs can be scored, and people are working out intense frustrations in their play on the asphalt court.

There is, then, a bit of the touristic gaze about *Hoop Dreams*. White America can enter a hallowed but dangerous ground through this movie, just as white sophisticates once braved the strange land of Harlem to travel to see black entertainment at the Cotton Club. The first signal of this is a slow motion shot of 14-year old William soaring through the air to dunk the ball on a netless rim. The lack of a net gives this particular dunk an ascetic quality—no frills, we are not in the suburbs, these are mean streets. The slow motion and the repetition of the shot are the filmmaker's stylistic signature. They know this single act is the essence of the film, the dream that starts on an inferior court and somehow ends at Marquette University's state of the art arena with thousands cheering and lucrative pro contracts in the wings.

Though *Hoop Dreams* is certainly a documentary, its success turns on a Horatio Alger narrative worthy of any Hollywood film. It tracks the lives of its two subjects from an eighth grade tryout for high school basketball powerhouse St. Joe's up to their entrance in college—William at Marquette, Arthur at the Mineral Area Junior College in Missouri. The five year time span is crucial to the film's success. Had the film traced only the first two years through their sophomore season, it would have ended with William's dreams derailed by an injury and Arthur

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shuffled off to a lesser high school because his parents could not afford the tuition. Such an ending would have provided a strong indictment of the system that used the boys and gave them little in return except heart ache. However, American society does not really want to hear that version of the story anymore than it wants to hear that Michael Jordan is an arrogant, self-involved prima donna with a gambling addiction.

So the narrative stays with the boys for another three years and more drama unfolds. William rehabilitates his knee but comes up short of his dream of winning a state championship. Arthur, at the also ran, predominantly black high school, unexpectedly gets involved with a cinderella team that goes to the state semi-finals after beating the previous year's best team in the nation. Again, it would seem that such a turn of events would provide an appropriately dramatic finish. Now, however, the film would be unduly optimistic—Arthur's team vindicating the dreams of the previous four years and possibly supplying an argument for black players staying away from the wealthy, white high schools that recruit black stars.[5]

But another twist occurs. Although William is bitter about his St. Joe's experience, there seems little question that it is the advantages of a superior high school and an Encyclopedia Britannica training course which they have arranged for him that helps him to get a 17 on his ACT and to enroll at Marquette. Arthur, on the other hand, can not get the 17, barely finishes high school, and enrolls in an obscure junior college, where six of the seven black students at the school are on the basketball team. The film leaves us there, William seems bitter, but he assures us that he has learned that he can have a life without basketball and be happy. Arthur seems to cling to the dream although a stranger in a strange land. Neither player seems now destined for the NBA, but they both seem to have more maturity and wisdom; we sense that they can survive without basketball. The bittersweet quality of the ending is further developed by the revelation that both boys have become unwed fathers. This should remind the more reflective viewer that there are limits to how well we know these two people through the medium of cinema verite documentary.[6]

While the film suggests that the environment the boys grow up in is a dangerous one—Arthur's mother says it is an accomplishment to live to the age of 18—our view of their interaction with ghetto life is circumscribed. Off-screen, Arthur is held up by a crack-head, which becomes the final straw in his deciding to sign with the junior college. Off-screen Arthur's father beats his mother, leaves the family, serves jail time. Off-screen Arthur's best friend, Shannon, succumbs to a life of drugs and crime. These are events we are only privy to through the voice-of-God, off-screen narration performed by the film's director, Steve James. A different stylistic choice would have been letting Agee and Gates narrate the film—they are both communications majors after all. However, in the final analysis we see the lives of Gates and Agee through a white filmmaker's lens, and perhaps it is thus more appropriate that the narration reflect that positioning.

The filmmakers have admitted to being completely surprised at finding out Gates had a three-month old daughter. That there are limits to how well we can know a subject when three hours of film time represents five years of two people's lives should not surprise us.[7] However, this seemed to escape a *Chicago Tribune* reviewer who wrote enthusiastically: "*Hoop Dreams* digs far below the surface...showing us everything—the games, practices, home life, friendships, the good times and bad times..."[8] I might modify his word choice from "shows us everything" to "shows us everything the filmmakers want us to see," although even that statement is complicated by the fact that there certainly must have been a bit of negotiations between filmmaker and subjects over when and when not to turn on the camera.

The camera reality that finally is on display is filtered through the biases of the

filmmakers. That there is an quasi-ethnographic concern on the part of the white filmmakers travelling to Cabrini Green and the Chicago west side is best demonstrated in some of the editing choices. (Editing, of course, was what produced the film's lone academy award nomination.) In particular, montage juxtapositional editing, or "collision" editing in Eisenstein's terminology, is used in sections dealing with the state championship tournament. Agee is competing for the black, inner city high school, Marshall, coached by Luther Bedford. Gates plays for the majority white, Catholic, well-funded high school, St. Joseph's, coached by Gene Pingatore. The most vivid juxtaposition cuts the two respective bus trips together. Pingatore in a somber, funeral like atmosphere admonishes the boys to think quietly about the upcoming game. Bedford's bus, on the other hand, is raucous, party-like, and the boys boisterously brag about how they will beat their opponents. To many viewers, there must be satisfaction in the fact that it is Bedford's basketball-is-fun attitude that prevails in the tournament and not Pingatore's win-at-all-costs.

The filmmakers make other interesting juxtapositions: shots of crowd behavior at Marshall versus St. Joseph's. Shots of students dancing to R and B music at Marshall are cut against the more stilted pep band playing at St. Joseph's. The school atmosphere shots are also juxtaposed. In one of the better scenes, two cultures come together in a single shot. Black parents of Marshall players joke good-naturedly with white parents from an opponent at a restaurant "down-state" where the tournament is taking place. The respective parents' pride in their children seems to transcend the racial and cultural differences.

The editing also uses linkage montage to suggest similarities and parallels between Gates and Agee that are of no small interest to a sociology of the black family. The disappearance of the black father is one of the more salient aspects of the culture of poverty in black America. Throughout the film, images centering around the theme of fatherhood are paralleled between William and Arthur. William's father has been absent since he was a young child. In one scene he goes to visit the lost father's auto repair shop accompanied by the off-camera filmmakers. William is skeptical of the father's sudden interest following his basketball fame, but the presence of white cameramen must have put an additional strain on the reunion that is never commented upon. One wonders if the filmmakers directly or indirectly persuaded William to go through with the emotionally charged event.

Agee's father is a more frequent presence in the film. At one point we see him in the distance at his son's playground scoring drugs. In another memorable scene, the father and son have a one-on-one game that threatens to get ugly with emotions they respectively invest in the game. As was mentioned earlier, for a period of time Agee's father leaves the family and is in jail. He returns a born-again Christian, although a strain remains evident in the family which the filmmakers treat tactfully.

Fatherhood is also manifest in the relationship between Gates and his older brother and in Gates relationship with his illegitimate daughter. Curtis, the elder brother, tries to be a guiding figure for William, but it is clear that the filmmakers are more interested in Curtis as a casualty of basketball dreams. He was a former junior college star who is now unemployed until William's Encyclopedia Britannica patron gets Curtis a job in the packing room. His presence in William's life seems to fade as Coach Pingatore becomes more dominant. William in several scenes is seen playing with his daughter and promising that he will never desert her as he was deserted himself. It seems the filmmakers want to close on this optimistic note, and William's relationship with his daughter's mother is not explained at much length.[9]

2 The mothers of the two players are presented as the bedrock of the respective families. In an extraordinary scene, Arthur's mother gets the highest grade in her nursing class and breaks down and weeps for joy. By

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this point the audience for the film is firmly in her corner. When Arthur turns 18 she loses her ADC support for him and the filmmakers tape her complaining about the difficulties this presents to their survival. Even in an age of Republican slashing of the Welfare system, I think most of the film's audience are sympathetic to her complaints.

Hoop Dreams opens up two black families to our inspection for three hours. Some critics have complained that what American society really needs is a film about black kids struggling to attain careers in teaching or medicine. This complaint, however, points directly to the problematic status of documentary's truth claim. Documentaries purport to be about what is rather than what should be. Even had the filmmakers found two aspiring physicists in Cabrini Green high schools, would audiences for the resulting film be inclined to believe the hypothetical students stood in representationally for a larger demographic group in our culture? The fact is we know this hoop dream exists, our mass media is drenched in it and our children reconfirm it every time they lace up their Air Jordan tennis shoes.

Whether *Hoop Dreams* the film critically challenges the siren song of athletic glory that obsesses so many black children or whether the moderate success of the two protagonists only reconfirms the notion that basketball is the best way out of poverty is what is at issue. In the aftermath of the media frenzy that surrounded the film's initial success, the answer seems fairly clear. President Clinton arranged photo ops with the boys with rhetoric about how they were ideal Americans. Arthur Agee has signed on with the Continental Basketball Association. William Gates has started his own company to market himself. Both are finishing their college degrees. All that hard work on the asphalt courts paid off for these two even if they ultimately will be denied Michael Jordan status.

On the other hand, there were some more intangible results about which we can only speculate. White America got a close-up look at black poverty; maybe the film produced some empathy and understanding in a racially polarized country. One reported phenomenon was that across the country coaches at all levels were taking their teams to view the film, apparently as a motivational tool or maybe to compare themselves to Coach Pingatore. Or maybe it was to show that kids of all colors and socio income brackets share something and that is a love for playing basketball. The uses and responses to film are many. The final use will be Spike Lee's; he will produce a fictionalized version of the story.

There was nothing predictable about *Hoop Dreams*. Three baby boomer, white, independent filmmakers with very little money got an idea about making a documentary focusing on playground basketball culture. They crossed a cultural divide and befriended two families who took big risks with them. They spent five years on the project, a substantial chunk of anyone's life, and they created something quite unique—an almost three-hour long documentary that had people purchasing tickets on a Friday night in suburban malls. Its success is a testament to good filmmaking, as well as to the fact that American culture is desperate for messages that will bring races together rather than pushing them apart.

Endnotes

1. I use the term "The Other" in the sense that Bill Nichols does in *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp. 202-209.

2. David Denby, *New York*. (v. 27: October 24, 1994), p. 60.

3. David Bordwell, *Making Meaning* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 1989). Bordwell writes: "Taking meaning-making as a constructive activity leads us to a fresh model of interpreting films. The critic does not burrow into the text, probe it, get behinds its facade, dig to reveal its hidden meanings; the surface/depth metaphor does not capture the inferential process of interpretation. . . . An interpretation is built upward, as it were, gaining solidity and scale as other textual materials and appropriate supports (analogies, extrinsic evidence, theoretical doctrines) are introduced." p. 13.

4. Richard Corliss makes a similar observation to Denby's: "*Hoop Dreams* isn't mainly about sport, or even about life and death in the inner city. It's about families hanging tough on nerve and prayer. It's about what passes for the American dream to people whose daily lives are closer to nightmares." *Time* (v 144, p. 76: October 24, 1994), "Hoop Dreams."

5. When saying St. Joseph's is a white high school, I am overstating the case, just as most critical commentary on the film has. The *Chicago Tribune* reported the following statistics, which were released to them by the school: "The school's enrollment is about 20 percent African-American, 18 percent Hispanic and 2 to 3 percent Asian-American. About 87 percent of all students, and 92 percent of all basketball players, in the last five years at the school have gone on to college. . . ." Poe, J. (1994, October 6). "St Joe's calls foul on film," *Chicago Tribune* (section 2C), p. 8. The statistics on students going to college suggest a high income bracket clientele.

6. For a discussion of American cinema verite's tradition, see Richard Barsam's *Non-Fiction Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 300-308.

7. About the surprise announcement of William's baby daughter, Mike Gower comments—"William has clearly set the agenda for when this part of his life should be revealed to the world." "Hoop Fantasies," *Sight and Sound* (v 74, n. 5—July 1, 1995) p. 64.

8. Michael Wilmington, "The 'Dreams' Team," *Chicago Tribune* (January 1, 1995: Section 13, p. 4).

9. Paul Arthur and Janet Cutler found the strategy of what is revealed about the two players to be obsessively focused on their basketball careers: "Do they listen to music, watch TV or so to the movies, worry about dating, talk about clothes or crime? *Hoop Dreams* either suppresses this information or treats it as ammunition for surprising plot twists." "On the Rebound: *Hoop Dreams* and Its Discontents," *Cineaste*, (v 21, n. 3—1995) p. 23. Arthur and Cutler also feel the film could be more didactic; they complain that no statistics are presented concerning black basketball player graduation rates, for instance.

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